DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 177 692 EA 012 183

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TITLE Education for Future Employment: A Primary School Responds to Community Needs.
PUB DATE 79
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Australian College of Education (20th, Perth, Western Australia, September 1979); Not available in paper copy due to light print of original document

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Disadvantaged Schools; Elementary Education; Foreign Countries; *Instructional Improvement; *Problem Solving; Reading Programs; *Teachers
IDENTIFIERS Australia; *Australia (New South Wales); *Biraban Public School (Australia)

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the experience of one primary school--Biraban Public School in Toronto--whose graduates had difficulty in finding jobs because of the poor academic preparation they received in primary grades. Parents were the first to express concern at the standard of education in the school, particularly in basic subjects. Their action led to an improved reading program. Also, teachers contributed to instructional improvement when they were invited to share in problem-solving with the principal. The paper says this approach to problem-solving was the major factor in improvements at the school. (LD)

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THE AUSTRALIAN COLLEGE OF EDUCATION - 20TH ANNUAL CONFERENCE

PERTH - 1979

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EDUCATION FOR FUTURE EMPLOYMENT

A PRIMARY SCHOOL RESPONDS TO COMMUNITY NEEDS

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Parental alarm at the level of unemployment among local teenagers stimulated Biraban Public School to rethink its school policies and practices. The community urged that academic standards be raised so that students would be better able to find employment on leaving school. Part of the school's response entailed establishment of the Centre for Analytical Reading Development Skills. Staff members of the Centre work mainly with average and above average pupils to increase the level of their attainments.

Efforts to raise teachers' expectations for their pupils and to build the image of the school among pupils, staff and the community have accompanied the changed academic programme.

Many problems still exist at the school, but this case study may provoke discussion about policies and practices aimed at improving academic standards. There have not been any deliberate innovations at Biraban, rather the changes which have taken place have been the response to problems. When a problem is identified it is discussed by the group charged with finding the solution. The problem-solving group may be the executive or the whole staff, the staff of the infants or the primary department, or of the reading centre.

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THE SETTING

Biraban Public School draws all but two of its students from the state housing commission settlement that forms part of Toronto, an outer, lakeside suburb of Newcastle, New South Wales. The school opened as Toronto West Public School in 1956 with an enrolment of 105. Enrolment grew to 229 by 1971, then to 299 in 1974 and to 407 in 1975, a 36 per cent increase in 12 months. This year's enrolment is 431 in the seven infants and primary years.

Approximately 500 new homes were erected in 1973-74, but no new parks, ovals, community halls or clubs were established. There were few organized activities for children outside school hours. The newcomers had to form new friendship ties. Social and sporting clubs take time to develop and few of the new arrivals had the skills required to organize clubs for themselves. School parent organizations in such circumstances find it difficult to obtain office-bearers able to plan fund-raising activities. Since children have few organized outlets for their energies, anti-social activities sometimes provide such outlets.

A survey in 1978 showed that 36.7 per cent of parents were pensioners and a further 10.0 per cent were receiving unemployment benefits. In addition, 18.9 per cent of the students were from homes where both parents worked. Of the students, 8.7 per cent were Aboriginal. The unemployment rate among older brothers and sisters who have left school is considerably higher than among the parents.

In October-November, 1976, two inspectors of the New South Wales Department of Education carried out an appraisal of the school, that is, an official evaluation of the school in association with the

school staff. One section of the appraisal was a meeting with parents who expressed deep concern at the standard of education in the school, particularly in the traditional basic subjects. They were worried about the difficulties experienced by their children in obtaining employment. Schonell reading tests administered in 1976 had revealed that more than half the primary pupils had reading ages one year or more below their chronological ages.

In an attempt to overcome the social difficulties of the community, the school had concentrated for 3 years on a programme of social education. The inspectors pointed out that, while this had achieved a measure of success, "it would seem reasonable for the school to begin making an all-out attack on selected areas of the skills in an attempt to bring about a DRAMATIC improvement in the kind of performance parents and the community can best see and understand."(1) Another problem identified by the inspectors was that of the pupils' poor self-image and accompanying level of expectation. They pointed out that some parents felt that, while the staff was expecting more in the area of social development, there was an "expecting less" attitude in the academic field.

The new principal, appointed from the beginning of 1977, was able to visit the school in late 1976 for a meeting with the parents, and for a further meeting with the inspectors and staff. At these meetings the concerns raised in the appraisal report were discussed. He made two subsequent visits for meetings with the staff and at the first of these meetings, teachers were asked individually to identify areas where improvement was desirable in the school. The lists were collated and at the second meeting the combined list was discussed by the teachers in groups. The groups put forward their lists in priority order and from these lists the principal presented an interim school policy

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on the first day of school in 1977. It placed great stress on reading as the main target for improvement.

THE NEW POLICIES

On the first day of that new school year, teachers were given copies of an article entitled "The Pygmalion Effect Lives"(2) to read and discuss. This article, by Robert Rosenthal, discusses evidence for his contention that students live up to, or down to, their teachers' expectations of them. Rosenthal believes that teachers express their opinions in word, grimace or gesture, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously, and that teachers who believe their students are bright teach harder. The discussion centred around the theme: "Will our students perform better if we expect more of them?" This was a theme to which teachers often referred during the year as they found that their pupils were improving. On the first day of school in 1978, a two page summary of Rosenthal's ideas ("What You Expect May Be What You Ge[illegible]"(3)) was distributed at a staff meeting to reinforce the idea.

There were, initially, two schools of thought among the teachers. On the one hand were those who believed that the social programme should continue to be the dominant theme in school policy. On the other hand were those who wished the school to 'get back to the basics', the debate taking place in the media tending to reinforce this school of thought in their view. The new principal had to 'walk a tightrope' between the two. Certainly, standards had to be improved, yet the social development side could not be allowed to slip because of the position of this school in a new community. While, to many of the teachers, one view or the other should predominate, there appeared to be no good reason why the two could not, indeed should not, be integrated to form the basis for a balanced education for the students.

The staff of this school provided a microcosm of the debate taking place in the wider society and particularly in our profession - that between the conservatives and the progressives. Lloyd Dennis, co-author of the Hall-Dennis Report, "Living and Learning"(4), which was so influential on education in Ontario, might have been speaking directly to the needs of this school, or to the protagonists in the Australia-wide debate when he wrote on this same debate in Ontario: "But man is a social creature. His desire to know does not begin and end in himself, but is experienced in a social context. ... Too little is said about this seemingly paradoxical position of public education. As a result, we content ourselves with quarrelling about superficial issues. The fact that we quarrel is bad enough; the fact that we quarrel over the answers to the wrong questions guarantees mutual defeat."(5) While we continue as educationists to quarrel among ourselves as to which school of thought is correct, the taxpayers will quite likely remain loathe to entrust us with a greater share of public funds. While one view or the other prevailed, or when staff members were unable to agree, parents remained dissatisfied with education at this school.

In attempting to weld the staff into a unified team with clear and mutually agreed goals, regular and frequent staff meetings, both formal and informal were utilized. Formal staff meetings are held weekly, but are kept to a duration of 45 minutes. The principal and the three senior staff members have morning tea and lunch with the remainder of the staff, but meet weekly also as an executive. Over the course of time the staff have come to work together as a team. An amalgam of views has come to be the agreed policy, with constant striving for higher academic attainments, yet with the goal of social adjustment ever in mind. Higher standards of work have helped to improve the self-image

of pupils. An attempt has been made to follow the course suggested by Mara Wolynski who wrote of her experiences as a child in a permissive school: "And now I've come to see that the real job of school is to entice the student into the web of knowledge and then, if he's not enticed, to drag him in. I wish I had been."(6)

During 1977, a new policy was developed which sought to reconcile the two schools of thought. It pointed out in the introduction the need to work together for the good of the students, that the compromise between different ideals would need to be based on faith; faith in one another, in the good intentions of the teacher, the parent and the pupil, and faith in ourselves. It stated, too, that love would be needed to foster teaching and learning in an atmosphere of humane understanding, as well as hope that by continued perseverence the goals set for the school could be attained. This trilogy is, of course, far from original, but it seemed particularly applicable in this setting and when a draft was presented to staff, it struck a responsive chord. Agreement with it was unanimous.

The new policy set out the need to place reading as the highest priority since it had been identified as the major weakness. In a school where pupils on entry are frequently handicapped in language, a drive to improve language had to be launched concurrently, since language is a prerequisite for reading. The other traditional school subjects were not to be neglected, but language and reading were to have priority.

The emphasis has not been only on the context of knowledge, however. Knowledge generates the power to acquire further knowledge and as skills in reading have risen, the emphasis in that subject has shifted towards acquisition of the skills of thinking and research that provide

the generative power students will need to acquire knowledge for themselves.

Since the community consists of large numbers of people who have often suffered setbacks, it was seen as important that these children should learn to handle failure and be able to turn such difficulties into ultimate success. The school policy points out that we do not reach our goals only by attempting that which we know we may successfully complete. As humans we attain great satisfaction from our successes when we know it is possible we may have failed. We need to have the sense of accomplishment which comes from success in such endeavours. It is also essential that we fail occasionally so that we may learn to handle setbacks and to gain the added satisfaction which comes when we ultimately triumph through perseverence. The school policy, therefore, is to constantly attempt to challenge pupils to strive to improve, to seek success in schoolwork and in life itself. By becoming accustomed to success it is hoped that they will gain a larger measure of self-confidence.

These policies were developed over the first half of 1977 at a series of staff meetings. The whole policy was accepted by the staff when presented in draft form in June since it was the fruition of the attempts made over several months to find what was best for the particular children in this school. Not all teachers agreed completely with it, but they were willing to accept it on trust and have gradually become even more committed to it over time. One of the pleasing features over a three year period has been the great degree of staff stability. Of 22 teachers on the staff at any given time, only four have left, one to travel overseas, one for maternity reasons, one on promotion, and one who was transferred by mutual agreement. A "School

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Functioning and Climate" questionnaire developed by Professor M.C. Grassie[7] was completed by nine staff members in August, 1978. On the scale of 0-200, the average score was 157. A score in excess of 140 indicates a highly participative and democratic school. One of the items with a particularly high score was: "There is knowledge and commitment to policy," while the two items which received the highest scores were: "Staff are consulted on matters which affect them," and "Change is planned and organized". There does appear to be a relationship between the high scoring on these items, though there obviously are other factors also present.

THE POLICIES IN ACTION

A reorganization of the school staffing structure took place from January, 1977. The whole school policy described above meant that pupils were able to move year by year from Kindergarten to Year 6 without the sudden break which often occurs when they pass from the infants to the primary department. Nevertheless, younger pupils do have some needs that differ from upper primary pupils, so some flexibility is built in to the structure. School staff meetings are held at 8.30 every Tuesday morning. Once a fortnight the whole school staff meets to consider matters of school-wide concern. This meeting often considers discussion papers brought forward by a sub-committee. At the alternate fortnightly meetings infants and primary staff groups meet separately to consider the needs of children in their respective departments. Responsibility for implementation of school policies and for development of policies for those departments is delegated to the infants mistress (infants department) and the deputy principal (primary department). This provides them with opportunities for leadership.

The school has had, since 1977, the equivalent of two additional full-time teachers through disadvantaged funding. This entitlement has been used to employ three teachers, one full-time and two half-time teachers. The full-time teacher has relieved a senior class teacher who has developed on-the-job expertise in special education. During 1977 this teacher and the two part-time teachers withdrew children with learning difficulties for remedial instruction. At the end of that year, while it was felt that considerable progress had been made, it was obvious that the programme could have been more effective. Standardized test results confirmed this. Of 239 students in years 2 to 5, 172 had a reading age below their chronological age. Of these, 23 did not score at all. The Holborn Reading Test was used. Pupils who scored a reading age below 7 years 3 months were also given the St Lucia test.

During 1977 teachers had proposed that the name of the school be changed as the name 'Toronto West' had an undesirable reputation in the community and in the profession. The proposal was taken to meetings of the Parents and Citizens Association, the Infants Mothers Club and the local Community Development Group. All three bodies were very enthusiastic about the proposal. The Community Development Group held a competition to select a suitable name and a prize was awarded to the student who submitted the best name. The name selected, "Biraban", was significant as it was the name of the leader of the Awabakal tribe of Aborigines at the time of the first white settlement in Toronto. Biraban is remembered because of his work to bring harmony between the black and the white people. The schoolchildren were enthusiastic about the proposed name, so a ballot was held among the parents who voted in favour of Biraban. The Department of Education agreed to change the name to Biraban Public School

from the beginning of the 1978 school year. From September, 1977, till October, 1978, the school was rebuilt and the grounds landscaped. New school letterhead paper and pupil report cards were printed and a new school badge was designed by a Year 6 student. Pupils and parents began to take great pride in their school.

The school library in January, 1977, had 1,800 books. This had been increased to just over 5,500 by mid-1979. The increase in book borrowing has been dramatic, with average daily borrowing up over 500 per cent. Students begin using the library in Kindergarten. Stories are read to them both in the classroom and in the library. They are encouraged to borrow books so that their mother, father, or older siblings may read to them. They are given simple library jobs such as straightening books. They care. It is <u>their</u> library. In 1977 and 1978 the main aim with the library was to entice the children to read. With rapid changes in the state of knowledge in the world, it is imperative that the adults of tomorrow be able to find the latest information as efficiently as possible, so in 1979 the emphasis began to shift both in the library and in classroom reading lessons towards research skills. The library has also undergone the transition to become a resource centre with non-book materials being placed there.

A new resource programme was developed to commence in 1978. The lowest reading group in each class was not withdrawn, nor was it taken by the specialist teachers. The specialist teachers, who now were referred to as resource teachers rather than remedial teachers, took either the top reading group or each of the class groups on a rotating basis with the class teacher. Formerly there had been a social stigma attached to membership of a withdrawal group and the

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school was reinforcing this daily by taking them out of the classroom. The resource teacher now took her groups in the classroom, team teaching with the class teacher. Several of the more experienced teachers were reluctant participants in team teaching at first, but as the school was being rebuilt, there were no spare rooms for withdrawal groups. Once the initial barrier had been broken down, all teachers became accustomed to teaching while another teacher was present in the room. The high quality of the people employed as resource teachers was another factor which helped the idea to gain general acceptance. It now became the responsibility of the class teacher and the resource teacher to jointly plan the class reading programme. The resource teacher was free of teaching for half an hour per day to seek out suitable resources for use in the programme.

Another factor was influential in the decision not to have resource teachers work with the lowest group in each class. The reading problem was not confined only to children of low ability. Many of the students experiencing difficulty were those of average or above average ability. There were too many with problems for the resource teachers to adequately help them all, so a value judgement had to be made as to which groups were to receive additional assistance. The decision to use the resource teachers with the brightest students was taken because it was felt that these were the ones who were more likely to obtain worthwhile employment and make a success in later life.

Ten mothers attended an inservice course designed for parents who assist with school reading programmes. They take infants pupils individually and listen to them reading. On their return from the course they spoke of the school they had visited and its "Language

Compensatory Unit." The title sounded very impressive, but upon investigation it became obvious that the work of the unit was similar to the work being undertaken by the remedial teachers at Toronto West School. It was decided that in 1978 the new programme should have a suitable title. The title chosen was the Centre for Analytical Reading Development Skills (C.A.R.D.S.). The Infants Mistress, who had developed considerable expertise in the teaching of reading, was placed in charge of the Centre with the three resource teachers as its staff.

Class groupings were also altered in 1978. Parallel classes continued to be used in the infants department, but a stratified heterogeneous grouping was used in the primary years (3-6). Primary pupils were ranked by reading age from 1 to 60, then allocated to Teachers A and B as follows:

Teacher A		Teacher B	
Group 1	Pupils 1 - 10	Group 2	11 - 20
Group 3	21 - 30	Group 4	31 - 40
Group 5	41 - 50	Group 6	51 - 60

This takes into account the concern for curtailing extreme heterogeneity in normal parallel classes. Each teacher now has a narrower range of pupils. Teacher A has the top ten, but none of the bottom ten, while Teacher B has the bottom 10, but none of the top 10. With the narrower range, teachers can give special attention where needed without feeling unable to meet the needs at the opposite extreme. Each class has leaders to stimulate each other. The top ten in Teacher B's class will probably be denied chances for leadership in an 'A' class. No teacher has to teach the 'B' class as occurs when pupils are divided into homogeneous groups (with 'A' and 'B' classes), nor is there a concentration of defeated, stigmatized, disruptive

pupils in the 'B' class.(8)

Social promotion through the grades has also been considerably modified. Unless pupils have attained a reasonable measure of success at any given year level, repetition is required. After two years of this policy fewer and fewer students are repeating in the higher grades. Repetition is seen as being most beneficial at the year 1, year 2 stage so that pupils master the skills at that level and are able to approach learning in later years with greater confidence. The "glow of success" which flows from increased competence seems to outweigh any hurt to the psyche, real or imagined, which is sometimes alleged to occur when a student is forced to repeat.

The 1978 results as measured on the Holborn and St Lucia Reading Tests were heartening. Of the 239 students in years 2-5 at November, 1977, 172 or 72 percent had reading ages below their chronological ages. Of those same pupils in years 3-6 at November, 1978, 133 or 55.6 per cent had reading ages below their chronological ages. The number who did not score decreased from 23 to 4. Eleven students increased their reading ages by more than 3 years and another 54 by between 2 and 3 years.

Several changes have taken place in the work of the resource teachers in 1979. As reading problems in the later years have diminished, the resource teachers are spending more of their time with infants classes. The S.R.A. Distar Laboratory is being used with pupils who are experiencing difficulties. It is highly structured and quite rigid in application, but the success rates being attained suggest that weak beginning readers benefit greatly from such a programme. This year three groups of 'talented' readers have been formed. These groups are taken by one of the resource teachers. One group consists of Year 2 students, another has been formed with students from Years 3 and 4, and the third with Year 5 and 6 students. The thirteen students in the latter group had reading

ages of 13.0 or higher at the end of Year 4 or 5 in 1978. In addition to these changes in the work of the Reading Centre, an emphasis on Mathematics and Spelling has been added in 1979.

CONCLUSION

Disadvantaged schools present a particular challenge to those entrusted with their care. Much yet remains to be done at Biraban School. The learning and research skills have yet to be organized for systematic teaching through the years. Science has been largely neglected to date, while music, art and craft are not strong in some sections of the school. Even in reading, language, maths and spelling standards can still be improved. Part of the excitement of work in such a school stems from the personal satisfaction gained when success comes as a result of effort expended. The challenge continues to stimulate the staff while more remains to be done - and in this school, in particular, further improvements will always be possible.

This paper points to a few of the policies and practices that have been successful. Perhaps the Biraban experience may assist others to improve existing practice. There has been no attempt at Biraban to innovate per se. When a problem arises, the principal and his staff look at alternative ways of solving the problem. They discuss these and choose what appears to them to be the best available alternative. This approach to problem solving had been the major contributing factor in the improvements evident at this school. When teachers become involved in the decision-making process, their commitment to their policies, and to their work, is greatly increased.

It is hoped that a student's success in the primary school will be continued through the secondary years, thus leading to a rewarding career in later life.

FOOTNOTES

1. Toronto West Public School Appraisal Report, November, 1976.

2. Rosenthal, Robert. "The Pygmalion Effect Lives." Psychology Today, September, 1973, pp. 56-63.

3. Macht, Joel. Teacher/Teachim: The Toughest Game in Town. New York, John Wiley & Sons, 1975, pp. 22-23.

4. Hall-Dennis Report. Living and Learning. Report to the Provincial Committee on Aims and Objectives in Education in the Schools of Ontario. (E.M. Hall and L.A. Dennis, chairmen). Toronto: Newton Publishing Company, 1968.

5. Dennis, Lloyd A. On Basics in Education. The Ontario Association of Education Administrative Officials. Mimeo, p.3.

6. Wolynski, Mara. "Confessions of a Misspent Youth." Newsweek, 30th August, 1976, p.11.

7. This was a duplicated questionnaire administered prior to a conference of Hunter Region principals.

8. The idea of stratified, heterogeneous grouping of pupils is set out in greater detail in "The Pros and Cons of Ability Grouping" by Warren G. Findley and Miriam M. Bryan (Bloomington, Indiana, Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 1975). It suggests, for instance, that a year of 90 students might be divided with Teacher A taking groups 1, 4 and 7; Teacher B groups 2, 5 and 8; and Teacher C groups 3, 6 and 9.

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28th June, 1979.